

Jonah 2 – Salvation Belongs to the Lord

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish,² saying,

“I called out to the LORD, out of my distress,
and he answered me;

out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.

³ For you cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.

⁴ Then I said, ‘I am driven away
from your sight;
yet I shall again look
upon your holy temple.’

⁵ The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;

weeds were wrapped about my head
⁶ at the roots of the mountains.

I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O LORD my God.

⁷ When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the LORD,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.

⁸ Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.

⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.

Salvation belongs to the LORD!”

¹⁰ And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

Intro

If you had to sum up the bible in a sentence, what would it be? Good moral instruction? Inspiring stories? The legends and myths of Israel? The story of God’s acts in history? Actually your answer to that question reveals a lot about how you view your relationship to God. In this prayer of Jonah we find a statement that many theologians throughout history have seen as essentially the message of the whole bible compressed into a sentence: salvation belongs to the Lord. See,

after he is cast into the ocean and swallowed by the great fish Jonah prays, and his prayer reveals crucial things we need to learn if we are to come to the same place of praise and peace that he does. If you learn this lesson you'll have found the key to understanding the whole bible. But how did he get to that deep understanding? He had to hit rock bottom first. So this morning we're going to take a trip down into rock bottom with Jonah. We're going to follow this great fish as it brings this wayward prophet to the ocean floor and see if we can discover the treasure of God's grace that he does.

Trans. And there are three things that we learn on this journey into God's grace. Namely, that we are deserving of judgment, we cannot save ourselves, and that salvation belongs to the Lord.

I. The first thing we learn here is that we are deserving of judgment (v. 3-4a)

- a. Look at how many times in verse three and the first half of verse four the pronoun "you" crops up: "You cast me into the deep...your waves and your billows". It was the sailors who cast Jonah into the ocean, but they had been unwittingly fulfilling God's intentions for Jonah. God was the ultimate reason for Jonah's being thrown into the sea.
 - i. Now, I live near the sea in Massachusetts, and I come from an island nation where the sea is a part of life (one of our nation's songs even proclaims that, "Britannia rules the waves!"). One of the things I love to do in the summer is swim in the sea: it's really pleasant! Japan is a seafaring nation as well, so this ancient fear of the ocean may seem a little over-dramatic to us. Well, the Israelites were not a seafaring nation. They were (as we say in England) "landlubbers". They feared the sea as a place of death and chaos, and it came to symbolize judgment in their culture. As we'll see it was likened to the underworld that every Israelite wanted to escape from. That's why throughout the bible you find the sea used as a metaphor for judgment.
 - ii. But the radical thing here is that Jonah is acknowledging the seas, and therefore chaos and judgment itself, belongs to God. He had been sent to preach against Nineveh and warn them of judgment, but here is Jonah experiencing a measure of that same judgment he was called to preach!
- b. And it's clear from this prayer that Jonah knows he deserves what he's getting, terrifying as it is. Here is a man who was a prophet: someone who was supposed to be sold out for God, obeying him in everything he said. Jonah is a total deserter of his God. He knows that the rightful punishment for disobedience is to be "driven away from God's sight". That's probably why he's so strangely resigned to being thrown into the sea in chapter one. Given that, isn't it ironic that Jonah's whole plan was to flee from the presence of God (literally "the face of God")? Jonah is reminding us that God has every right to say to the sinner, "Get out of my sight."
- c. Now, I realise that the word "sinner" comes with a lot of baggage. We tend to think of it like we're committing some kind of crime. We think, "I'm not a criminal; I haven't stolen, or murdered anyone, so I'm okay." But sin is so much more pervasive than that. It's not simply an on-off switch, it's more like an oil

spill which pollutes everything around it. Now, I want to give us a biblical way of thinking about sin that will help us understand our dire situation:

1. A way of understanding the tragedy of sin properly is found here in verse 8. Sin is idolatry. See, it's easy for a person who thinks they're moral to deny they deserve judgment because they have a wrong view of sin. Idolatry is about looking to anything other than God for your hope, worth, safety, and ultimate meaning. It's relational in nature. See, even good things can become idols like career, or family, or your own nation (as we can see with Jonah: he loves his nation so much more than God that it makes him hate those to whom he's called to preach). Idolatry is when a good, created thing becomes an ultimate thing. And will God stand idly by while his worth is scorned by his creation, and his name is dishonored and shamed by us choosing lesser things to build our lives upon? Would you? No! There must be consequences, and judgment is deserved.

Trans. Now, I know these are hard truths to hear, but they are so necessary if we are to journey into the freedom of grace that God offers! And we will get there! Bear with me! But before that we're shown yet another problem: not only are we deserving of judgment, but try as we might...

II. We can't save ourselves

- a. Did you notice how much of Jonah's prayer is spent richly describing the hopeless situation he's in? Verse 2 describes how Jonah is in the "Belly of Sheol" (literally the underworld; the Hebrew place of the dead from where there is no escape), verse 3 speaks of how he's surrounded by the ocean deeps and buffeted by the waves, verses five and six recount his descent to the roots of the mountains and the sources of the rivers (the lowest and most mysterious points in creation), and his being bound by the bars of death. Jonah has sunk down, down, down to the lowest most unreachable point possible.
 - i. Do you see what Jonah is saying here? He is as good as dead. No rescue was coming. Much of the poem describes the process of drowning, and this tells us that being deserving of judgment and yet unable to save ourselves, being entirely at the mercy of someone else, makes us feel like we're drowning and being crushed by the deeps. It is a picture of our own spiritual inability to save ourselves.
 1. The image that describes this perfectly is when Jonah talks about being entangled in seaweed. It reminds me of a time recently where I was swimming in a natural lake near the seminary in Massachusetts. Now, I am a strong swimmer, but when you hit an unexpected patch of weeds things get dangerous very quickly. I swam straight into them and became disoriented: I couldn't tell which way was up and which way was down. I started to panic and swim as hard as I could to try and break free but the more I struggled the more entangled I got! Thankfully I was able to relax long enough to disentangle myself, but it really brought home what

Jonah is talking about here in terms of our spiritual inability to disentangle ourselves from sin.

2. We think if we try and struggle hard enough we can escape the weeds, but we just end up more tangled and disoriented, and risk drowning. Working to be a better person and earn God's forgiveness will just drive you deeper into condemnation because it's an attempt to put God in your debt. You will never be disentangled from that spiritual treadmill because you'll never be sure if you've done enough! Spiritually speaking it is as if we have sunk down under the weight of our sin to the ocean floor. There's no way we can rescue ourselves any more than Jonah could rescue himself!
- b. Now, I know that all this talk of being unable to work ourselves out of this predicament goes against the grain of what we're told in society, both in Japan and America. One of the most amazing things about Japan's postwar history is its success in pulling itself literally out of the ash heap and becoming one of the world's most prosperous nations. That's nothing short of a miracle!
 - i. But what this has led to is what a Japanese friend of mine called the *ganbaru* attitude; the idea that with hard work and commitment you can achieve anything. There's a fierce pride in being able to make and achieve your own destiny. And this isn't just unique to Japan, America has something similar in its Protestant work ethic where if you work hard you'll achieve your dreams. But when you look at the bigger picture, for both Japan and the USA having our foot to the economic pedal hasn't saved us. It may have brought prosperity, but what has the cost been? America is just as divided and socially broken as it's ever been, and Japan is clearly struggling as its social fabric unravels. Death by overwork is rife, and marriages fall apart due to the pressure placed upon people to work as hard as they can. See, we can't ultimately save ourselves!
- c. But in the midst of this bleak picture let me offer an encouragement. Do you know what kind of person the God of Israel is? Yes, he's a judge and he will by no means let guilt go unpunished, but being unable to save yourself makes you a prime candidate for God's grace.
 - i. See, in Jonah's prayer it was at the point where all hope was lost that the Lord intervened. In verse 6 at the lowest point God draws Jonah up from the pit of death. And this is just the kind of God he is! One commentator put it like this: "For God to lead out the helpless is his very own, most characteristic act of salvation, ever since the Israelites were led out of Egypt." Again and again God hears the cry of those who know they're without hope, and saves them. Your hopelessness doesn't put you out of reach of God's grace. It's the precondition for it.

Trans. What a bleak situation this prayer paints! We're deserving of judgment for our sin and yet we cannot save ourselves. But you may have noticed how, as we've just discussed, hope shines through the cracks at different places in this passage. And it's these places which show us finally that...

III. Salvation belongs to the Lord

- a. There is an interesting contrast that is a little obscured by the English translation in verse 8. The phrase “false idols” is made up of a word that means ‘vapour’ or ‘mist’: *hevel*. It’s the same word used in Ecclesiastes over and over for “vanity”. The other word of note is “steadfast love”, which in Hebrew is a very special word: *hesed*. It is a word which means God’s loyalty to his covenant promises; that he’s a God of his word and will love his people unconditionally. See the comparison? From *hevel* to *hesed*. The contrast here is that idols (anything that promises us worth, significance, and ultimate meaning apart from God) are empty and promise more than they can deliver. They cannot save us any more than we can save ourselves. God, on the other hand, is full to overflowing of love and mercy to the undeserving as well as the power to save them.
 - i. Jonah has seen (at least partly) his own emptiness and the futility of his own ways. But he remembers how God is full of compassion. Every idol will leave you empty, because they themselves are empty. But only God will leave you overflowing; lost in wonder, love, and praise
- b. And that steadfast love of God was focused on one very special place in Jerusalem, and it’s mentioned twice in this prayer: God’s holy temple. Why would Jonah keep referring to that? Because in the Most Holy Place of the temple was the most powerful reminder of God’s steadfast love.
 - i. Behind the curtain in the temple stood the ark of the covenant. Atop the ark of the covenant on the lid stood what was called the Mercy Seat. It was the lid that covered the Ten Commandments that Israel was bound to keep (and often broke). In the same place you had both law and grace, and it was an astounding thing that the mercy seat stood over the tablets of the law. It was the place where the High Priest would enter in once a year on the Day of Atonement to meet with God himself and sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice so that Israel’s sins could be forgiven for failing to keep God’s law. It was the assurance that God was not just able to save, but willing to save. But that assurance couldn’t come without the death of another. An animal had to die for its blood to secure forgiveness and mercy.
 - ii. And at this point You might be asking, “how can the same God who judges sinful people be the one who overflows with mercy towards them? Which is it?” And that is a great question. Actually, it’s the central question of the whole Old Testament, and it isn’t answered until the Son of God is nailed to a cross outside of Jerusalem. The blood of animals wasn’t enough to take away our sin, only the blood of God’s Son would be enough for all.
 1. We have a perspective on this side of the cross that Jonah didn’t. Jesus was plunged deep into the abyss of God’s wrath. The bars of death closed around him. He sank down further than any of us will ever go, though he was not deserving of judgment, and could at any time have saved himself. He was crushed under the waves and breakers of God’s anger. His life was the costly sacrifice that

secured our rescue, ended our exile, and restored our relationship with God.

Conclusion

And Jonah's prayer ends with this joyful shout: salvation belongs to the Lord! To him alone. Not partly to you and partly to him. He does it all. You contribute nothing but your need. That's the gospel in all its consoling, beautiful, humbling glory. Maybe you don't believe you need grace, and therefore it's not stunning to you. Or maybe you know you're a failure but God's love is still abstract to you. Are you sinking down in your sin, tangled in the weeds and helpless? Cry out to God! You are a prime candidate for being rescued. Even a person tied down and chained up can cry out! Remember that God uses suffering and trials not to break us down, but to break us open and fit us to receive his grace, because the usual place to learn the greatest secrets of grace is at rock bottom. Like Jonah, look to the mercy seat and what it symbolizes: the death of Jesus for undeserving sinners. We deserve judgment for our sin, yet are unable to save ourselves, but God is willing and able to save us. We are worse than we could ever imagine, yet more loved than we ever dared hope. Salvation belongs to the Lord!